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SUBJECT: MOMENTUM IN HELMAND? YES, BUT...

REF: A) KABUL 2143 B) KABUL 3286

Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Deputy Coordinator Hoyt Y
ee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Focused security, governance and reconstruction efforts in Helmand Province have led to hard-won progress of the U.S. area of operations. Garmsir and Nawa Districts -- where U.S. Marines have solidified recent security gains in important, relatively densely populated centers -- stand out for their improvements. Close partnering among military, Afghan and coalition civilians has helped sustain momentum. Where Marine units face greater resource constraints, including persistent gaps in Afghan capacity, our ability to affect stabilization is limited. Deepening our efforts in Nawa and Garmsir will remain a primary focus, even as targeted Marine and Special Forces interdiction operations continue in less-populated.

12. (C) SUMMARY CONT'D: The MEB Commanding General and State/USAID Reps in Helmand, in coordination with the UK-led PRT, are beginning a district-by-district assessment in light of current resource levels (U.S., UK, and Afghan). U.S. Marine positions encompass about 40 percent of the Helmand population; UK forces cover the other 60 percent, including many of the most densely populated areas such as Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital. Regardless of the final U.S./UK troop numbers dedicated to Helmand, we have necessarily begun to prioritize our civilian-military efforts within the vast province. This process could result in decisions to withdraw from less-strategic areas outside of Helmand's more populated areas in order to more sustainably reinforce populated and intrinsically important districts. A major planned operation (Marjah) is currently on hold pending the ongoing interagency deliberations on future troop levels and uncertainty over the availability of sufficient U.S. and Afghan forces. END SUMMARY.

STRATEGIC DISTRICTS THAT MATTER

13. (C) Operation Khanjar, which commenced July 2 and included the insertion of approximately 4,500 Marines into the central Helmand River Valley, has enabled COIN traction in key districts -- principally Nawa and Garmsir. Pre-district Support Teams (pre-DSTs, or partially staffed DSTs) are fully functioning in these areas and local governance (despite few line ministry representatives on-site) is active. Officials in these districts, in consultation with pre-DST personnel and Marine civil affairs units, have identified priority projects to be funded using CERP, PRT and USAID resources. In both locations, real COIN practice is evident. Advance civil-military planning and coordination for initial stabilization and reconstruction in the districts has been an essential element of the success of these efforts thus far.

¶4. (C) In Nawa, for example, once akin to a UK "Fort Apache" and under frequent attack, a local community council has just been elected through the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP). In Garmsir, regular sessions between elders and local government leaders reflect a deep level of engagement -- the best example in Helmand of post-kinetic local participation. Recent VIP visitors (USG, coalition military and CODELs) have left both locations impressed by visible signs of progress. (NOTE: Recently, central ministry representatives visited Nawa, part of the new District Delivery Working Group (DDWG) (Reftel B), which is working to deliver essential services at the district level, initially in six priority districts. Nad Ali is the second priority district in Helmand currently identified for focused attention by the DDWG. END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) Helmand's Marjah area (part of Nad Ali District) represents a still unaddressed security challenge. It is the only no-go zone for Marine units in the Area of Operation (AO). Joint planning between the PRT and the MEB is underway to begin operations in Marjah -- intended to help showcase a significant ANSF role -- but additional U.S. forces will be required; ANSF have yet to be identified as well. The PRT and U.S. civilians are playing an active role in shaping local governance, tribal engagement and reconstruction planning if/when the Marjah operation is approved and resourced. (NOTE: Marjah is home to tracts of canals funded in the 1950s by the U.S. government, geography that would greatly add to the complexity of militarily clearing operations. Leading, and controversial, Marjah power brokers -- including a former provincial chief of police and narco-trafficker -- also share close ties to President

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Karzai, adding a political dimension to any operation and post-clearance phase. END NOTE)

NEW NEIGHBORHOODS, OLD CHALLENGES

¶6. (C) Elsewhere in Helmand and the Marine AO (which includes a corner of Nimruz and Farah Provinces), persistent challenges remain. Gaps in ANSF coverage and local governance capacity have limited our COIN traction (Bakwa, Golestan, and Now Zad fall into this category). In some of these locations, small platoon-sized Marine elements face complex terrain (physical, tribal, political) that has lacked government or coalition attention for most of the war -- and well before. Engagement with local leaders remains basic, often led by the lead Civil Affairs Sergeant only, and with some populations signaling a preference for Marine departures (in Bakwa, for example), where Afghans say that we have disrupted historic community equilibrium. In these more remote areas, local populations cite low expectations regarding coalition and government endurance; elders, unsurprisingly, see us as temporary neighbors.

¶7. (C) The highly symbolic and still abandoned city of Now Zad (Reftel A) represents perhaps the greatest long-term rebuilding and repopulating challenge -- a city that arguably does not warrant our greatest attention given other (and more realistically attainable) COIN objectives. Successful Marine operations have cleared key areas in and adjacent to the city center. Its mined and IED'd streets and fields, however, will first need to be cleared prior to any return of residents. Such an effort will likely be time and resource intensive -- and increasingly an Afghan government-led and resourced priority. Even with a successful de-mining effort, it remains unclear whether Now Zad's former residents, most having now built lives in Lashkar Gah, would return at all, especially non-landowners.

TARGETING AFGHAN CAPACITY

¶8. (C) Afghan central ministries recently demonstrated

important albeit preliminary outreach in Nawa (Reftel B). A group of Kabul-based officials, including from Afghan government and U.S. Embassy Kabul, representing the DDWG, visited the district (with Marine assets) on October 11 and met with area elders. The DDWG's work will be followed by a higher-level visit (MRRD, Education, among others are anticipated) and donor coordination in Kabul to ensure funding streams and other mechanisms of support are in place.

PROGRESS, BUT FRAGILE

¶9. (C) Our presence in Helmand's strategic districts has been brief. This factor poses perhaps our greatest challenge, as we are just beginning to understand these key neighborhoods and the various dynamics at play within them, including the tribal dimension and affiliated narco-trafficking networks. While Helmandis seek reassurance from us regarding our endurance, they also voice stubborn skepticism toward their government. Recent outreach through the Afghan government-led DDWG visits (Nawa as the first) could help close this gap if appropriately followed up. The steady arrival of more U.S. and UK civilians stationed alongside Marine infantry units in districts also has helped sustain governance engagement. The fact that Nawa has progressed so quickly bodes well.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Current momentum in Helmand needs to be assessed with the Afghan dimension foremost in mind; Marine operational pace is fast, that of Afghans (government, ANSF) remains much slower and will likely be the case for some time. Solidifying gains in population centers like Nawa and Garmsir (the DDWG has designated Garmsir as a "phase two" priority district) should enable these strategic anchors to move toward greater self-sustainment, even if parts of Helmand's hinterlands continue to be home to Taliban elements. Less important districts in Helmand that currently host Marine units constitute legitimate targets for military operations (and associated interagency civilian elements). However, given such districts' geographic isolation and small populations, they realistically represent multi-year commitments well beyond our current resource capacities and

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probable coalition patience and potentially detract from our population-centric strategy. Moreover, the return on force and resource down payments in these remote districts remains questionable.

¶11. (U) This cable has been reviewed by 2MEB Commander BGen Nicholson.
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